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# How Canadian Diversity and Anti-Oppression Educators Handle the Emotional Challenges of their Practice

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Identity, diversity, anti-oppression, habitus, reflexivity

**Abstract:** This study investigates the perspectives of diversity and anti-oppression educators working in the non-profit, settlement and education sectors in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Toronto, Ontario. The researcher explores how Canadian diversity and anti-oppression educators handle the emotional challenges of their practice. This paper also explores how language, identity and teacher recognition impact the learning process, and highlights the imperfect yet courageous practice that the diversity and anti-oppression educators in this study embark upon when facilitating discussions about diversity and oppression.

Diversity and anti-oppression education is an example of how education is looked to as an answer for bridging cultural, social and religious differences. In fact, some consider it as “one of the most widely used activities” (Carnevale & Stone, 1994, p. 29) when managing diversity in the workplace. Corporations, non-profit organizations and government agencies use this educational approach in an attempt to bring people together, improve productivity and raise sensitivity among employees, clients and citizens. This type of education is typically set up in a workshop format where learners engage in activities, group reflections and discussions about topics related to racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and physical and mental ability. Most diversity and anti-oppression educational settings are conducted for a limited period of time and range in length according to the needs of the group requesting the training.

People are drawn to diversity and anti-oppression education for a variety of reasons that have to do with their own experiences of negotiating their identity structure and how it relates to their peers, loved ones, co-workers, enemies and, most importantly, their students. The researcher has personally engaged in diversity and anti-oppression education as a participant and a facilitator and has often been left wondering if these learning environments encourage us or even allow us to extend our understanding of others and of our ‘selves’. Factors such as time constraints, facilitation methods and perspectives of the educators, as well as the highly sensitive and emotionally-charged topics of discussion, contribute to a challenging learning environment where developing a common understanding and shared vulnerability is difficult to achieve (Bracher, 2009). By reviewing the literature and highlighting findings from semi-structured interviews with six Canadian diversity and anti-oppression educators, we will gain an understanding of the challenges and constraints that diversity and anti-oppression educators experience in these learning contexts.

## Literature Review

*Language: Living with Contestability and the Impact on Learning.*

Defining key terms is a necessary and extremely challenging component of diversity and anti-oppression education (Mobley & Payne, 1992; Arai, Wanca-Thibault & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Kumashiro, 2001). There is a confusion of terms when discussing issues raised by this type of education, primarily because most of the terms considered in these learning environments are contested concepts that are “bounded by normative considerations” (Connolly, 1993, p. 29). Language, identified by Lacan as the Symbolic order, is the mode primarily used by humans to organize and communicate with one another. Mark Bracher (2006) asserts that language is a “major impetus for both learning and resistance to learning” (p. 24). In this sense, language can either support or threaten educational experiences depending upon the meanings attributed to specific terms. In most learning settings, humans need to act out and even protect the words that they have come to understand as part of their selfhood. Learning, in this sense, becomes about living up to the language, and thus, identities that people have come to recognize as their *own*. Indeed, *being* a woman, or *being* honest has serious implications on how one communicates in a learning setting (Bracher, 2006).

### *Emotionally-Charged Environments.*

In everyday contexts, learning stimulates a level of emotionality and fear when learners take risks, extend themselves and become open to new and often conflicting information. Diversity and anti-oppression training is particularly bound to emotional responses because of the level of risk and openness being asked of workshop participants. Facilitating these workshops is a demanding task and many people tend to shy away from engaging in deep conversations about identity and selfhood. Kumashiro (2001) asserts that part of this avoidance has to do with the fact that talking about diversity and anti-oppression “trouble[s] who we think and feel about not only the Other but also ourselves... we resist learning what will disrupt the frameworks we traditionally use to make sense of the world and ourselves” (p. 5).

In the context of diversity and anti-oppression training, there is a debate as to what extent facilitators should ask learners to put themselves in vulnerable positions and express the emotions that are so closely tied to their identity. Some authors do not agree that people should be pushed to ‘testify’ about their belief systems, identity or upbringing. Sometimes this approach tends to backfire by raising defences, creating backlash and shutting down the openness required to access and accept new information (Mobley & Payne, 1992). Others insist that pushing people past their comfort zone is critical to real and transformative learning (Kumashiro, 2001; Arai et al., 2001). Negotiating this debate gives us a strong indication of how emotionally volatile diversity and anti-oppression education can be for learners and educators alike.

Moreover, educator’s identities have a direct impact upon the learning that occurs within a diversity and anti-oppression workshop setting. Mark Bracher (2006) pushes us to move beyond the notion that identity is merely about social positioning. He encourages us to think about the identity *needs* of educators and brings the notion of teacher recognition to the discussion about human identity. These identity needs vary depending upon the instructor but are encompassed in such things as recognition in explicit (praise, flattery, positive evaluations), implicit (attendance, interest, responsiveness) and structural (money, position, rank, title) ways (Bracher, 2006, p. 150). Bracher identifies that recognition is “our most fundamental desire” (p. 150) and encourages educators to consider what type of recognition they receive when teaching. Bracher calls upon educators to ‘look within’ and answer tough questions in a self analysis questionnaire about identity development, recognition on the part of the teacher as well as analyzing the relationship that teachers have to their profession.

### *Other Challenges Faced by Diversity and Anti-Oppression Educators.*

The notion of self-analysis is directly linked to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the concept of *habitus* because it encourages teachers to look at their individual histories (Sayer, 2005). Andrew Sayer (2005) investigates the work of Bourdieu and asserts that “*habitus* refers to those deeply engrained dispositions which are the products of socialisation, particularly in early life, and which orient individuals at a subconscious level towards the world around them” (p. 24).

The *habitus* must be activated by us, is always dependent upon the context in which we live and is most recognized when we are out of place or in an environment that is unfamiliar (Sayer, 2005). Sayer (2005) extends Bourdieu’s concept by asserting that a *habitus* can be modified and changed based on our “internal conversations” (p. 29) about our upbringing. This extension gives room for people to be active participants and who can modify what they have come to know as their selfhood.

Being an active participant means that we must consider our surroundings and make appropriate decisions based on our environment. Margaret Archer (2007) analyzes the process of *reflexivity* where people negotiate the relationship between their own internal power of decision making with the resistant forces of the world such as social relationships, hegemonic discourses, cultural expectations, language and habitus. The end result of their decision making varies but the process of coming to decisions is encapsulated in the “interplay between people’s nascent ‘concerns’ (the importance of what they care about) and their ‘context’ (the continuity or discontinuity of their social environment)” (Archer, 2007, p.96). This process is of notable importance to diversity and anti-oppression educators because of the need to change people’s belief systems with the ultimate goal of developing a higher level of empathy towards others. Teaching about diversity and anti-oppression assists learners to recognize the “Self-Other overlap” (Bracher, 2009, p. 370) which is difficult for educators to express to a group. Every person in a workshop dynamic balances their own independent thoughts with the communal thoughts of the group. Ultimately, educators can never fully access the private thoughts of the workshop participants, which can be an extremely challenging situation to handle.

### **Research Design**

The research paradigm employed throughout this study is a qualitative mode of inquiry that “attempts to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The goal behind using a qualitative approach is to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges faced by diversity and anti-oppression educators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Accessing the conversations that diversity and anti-oppression educators was of utmost importance to the value of this study to develop a more profound sense of the research topic.

Grounded theory was employed in order to build theory about this group of educator’s experiences. There was no distinct break between data collection and data analysis and the researcher was fundamentally implicated in the research process. Collecting data for this study took the form of semi-structured interviews and corresponding field notes from the interviews, with six educators in Halifax, NS and Toronto, ON who have experience facilitating diversity trainings in the non-profit, settlement and education sectors. Prior to the interviews, a list of teacher self-analysis questions, modified from Bracher’s original questions, was sent to the research participants. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the researcher. From the data,

twenty-eight codes were created by the researcher, which were then sectioned into five major themes.

## Findings

### *Language, Identity and Recognition.*

After speaking with the research participants, what became most apparent was the extent to which a connection was not made between identity and language. When asked about the role of language in diversity and anti-oppression contexts, only one research participant acknowledged a strong connection between identity and language. A consensus did exist about language being a powerful and challenging phenomenon to negotiate in these learning environments. The challenges had more to do with learning a particular language, recognizing that language is never neutral and that it is contextual given the situation and what participants are in the room. This missing piece could possibly exist because most of these educators do not refer to psychoanalysis as a body of work that is integral to their practice. Identity for these educators has more to do with social location or positioning (ie: gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation) and the politics of identity instead of investigating the inner workings of the self and looking at what identity needs each of us have in social situations.

Teacher recognition is an essential component of the identity puzzle – one that has serious implications for the learning process in diversity and anti-oppression education. Asking ourselves poignant questions about what we get out of the teaching dynamic is difficult and makes us consider our own need for recognition in a way that has not been highlighted before. In this sense, the work of Mark Bracher pushes educators to think about their practice in a new way – one that encourages them to consider how their own need for recognition can impact and even impede learning. One of Bracher's driving motivations is to have educators look within and move towards a more compassionate approach to teaching and learning. One participant discussed the notion of being settled within her 'self' and I believe this to be an integral aspect to this type of education. In fact, it is an ethical obligation of diversity and anti-oppression educators seeking a more compassionate approach to their practice.

### *Emotionally-Charged Learning Sites.*

The study's participants reflected this dilemma identified in the literature review of how to address issues of real concern while maintaining the psychological safety of learners. Conversations about pushing people past their comfort zone, but doing so in a gentle way, came up with most of the educators in this study. There is a fine line between engaging in meaningful conversations about diversity and anti-oppression while maintaining an ethical and compassionate approach to everyone in the room. Extending compassion means including those involuntary learners, those who are angry and speak with 'venom', as well as those learners who the educator believes are not addressing their own privilege or taking risks in the way that is expected of them. Extending compassion also means recognizing one's own triggers and emotional baggage and learning how to detach while teaching in a way that prioritizes the student over the educator. As one of the educator's affirmed, one must be cognizant of the devastation left when offering to push people past their comfort zone, especially when you only have three hours with a group.

It appears that holding a series of workshops where learners and educators get to know one another over a season or even a semester affords the group to be pushed gently in a more effective and ethical manner. Learners and educators get to know each other, become familiar

with one another and build a stronger rapport which can lead to being pushed effectively and with concern for psychological safety. The same can be said for establishing a safe space for learners – with more time a genuine understanding of what is expected, how to deal with each other in a compassionate manner and how to maintain a level of confidentiality about shared personal experiences can be developed. Realistically, more time with students is something that these educators want but typically are not able to access from those hiring them to conduct trainings. In this sense, manager's expectations about what can be accomplished in a short window of time must be effectively addressed by educators.

The dynamic between educator's emotion and learner's emotion is a key component of this discussion. Diversity and anti-oppression educators balance the identity and identity needs of their students with the emotional reactions they experience while standing at the front of the room. Experiencing personal attacks and having learners direct their emotional responses towards them, feeling inadequate, taking things personally, learning how to detach, feeling excited about the fact that students are learning and that overall need to feel protected are all common and understandable human reactions to the environment that these educators face. Balancing this with the complex and often conflicting needs of their students is something that the participants in this study consider as part of their everyday practice. This emotional weight is considerable and one that is not taken lightly by the educators interviewed.

### *Social Forces Impacting our Selves.*

The struggle between individual needs and the weight of other social forces was apparent in this study. If the ultimate goal of diversity and anti-oppression is to tap into the inner thoughts and processes of learners so as to change their minds about stereotypes and marginalized groups, then it is of utmost importance that this type of education considers how people come to make decisions about their lives. This is an extremely heavy burden to bear but it is evident that this group of educators is committed to "planting seeds" about extremely sensitive and challenging material. They are essentially challenging the foundation by which learners have come to see themselves – in essence, their *habitus* – and are asking learners to dismantle what they have come to know as important to their selfhood.

To ask someone to step outside of this foundation and challenge them to consider another and often critical perspective is certainly an intervention. Ultimately, education itself is a social force that impacts the individual and bears down on how a person comes to make decisions about who they are and how they choose to incorporate new knowledge into their lives (Britzman, 1998). If we all agree that education is by definition a process of intervention, then diversity and anti-oppression education magnifies this essence in an unquestionable manner.

Throughout the study, the underlying struggle between individual needs and the weight of other social forces was ever apparent. Elements such as evaluation, time, money/funding and language arose as social forces that impact the development of pro-social and integrated identities. Time and money impacted whether the educators could deliver on their goals of making learners think in a different way. Examples of educators own emotional experiences with handling student projections also demonstrate the impact that social forces such as history and culture can have on learning.

Evaluation was also a challenge for most of the educators in this study. Of particular interest to this research was when learners leave a workshop appearing to be challenged and interested in the material and then they try to sabotage or be closed to the conversation about diversity the next time a group of learners met. Being reminded of Archer's (2007) notion of

reflexivity is integral because of the different ways in which people come to make important decisions about their lives. Archer posits that some people need approval from those around them, others make decisions independently and others need to critically evaluate their circumstance before making important decisions. When it comes to reflecting upon one's identity, socio-cultural upbringing and one's *habitus*, it is important for diversity and anti-oppression educators to be reminded of how different people will give weight to the social forces in their lives. Family, friends, community, language, history, culture and money can and will impact how decisions are made by learners about their identity and about the subjects discussed in diversity and anti-oppression training.

### *An Imperfect and Courageous Practice*

The extent to which the diversity and anti-oppression educators in this study cope with and handle the challenges of their practice gives us great insight into the strength, courage and stubbornness of this group of educators. These learning sites are incredibly challenging and dynamic with much riding on the outcome of these trainings – a better work environment, a more solid sense of our co-workers or peers, improved productivity and offering better services to clients and customers. In many ways, the expectations placed on diversity and anti-oppression education is greater than those placed on educators in an everyday classroom. Diversity and anti-oppression education is looked to as the last bastion of hope in order to gain a better sense of one another. Managers, supervisors, academics and teachers are looking to these educators to solve the identity puzzle, and typically do it in a three-hour window of time. The expectations are enormous and yet, we have learned from this group of educators that this last bastion of hope is by far a 'perfect science'.

Challenges such as establishing a common language, creating a safe space, learning how to push people gently, figuring out where learners 'are at' with the material, establishing a level of trust with co-facilitators and learners, negotiating the complexities of evaluation, handling the emotional projections of students and learning how to detach are very much felt by this group of educators. The educators in this study face these expectations placed upon them head on. They do not bow away from the challenge as most would do. In reality, there are not many educators who want to take on this kind of work. And yet, the group of diversity and anti-oppression educators in this study are committed and interested in bringing about these conversations that most of us try to avoid. The group in this study has developed a toolbox of activities, personal stories, co-facilitation techniques and various other skills to handle the wide variety of responses that arise in these learning environments. They have done this because they are committed to the cause of improving human relations and social justice initiatives.

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